

# AMBASSADORS TO THE WORLD

## Cultural Awareness for Americans in Uniform

COLONEL ROBERT B. NETT,  
U.S. ARMY, RETIRED

Either directly or indirectly, cultural awareness has long been a part of our military operations.

It can include the use of translators to communicate with host nation military and civilians, subject matter experts to advise the commander and his staff on the planning for population movements, or gaining a deeper understanding of the culture, customs, and sensitivities of a nation we are seeking to rebuild in the wake of war. When U.S. planners were drawing up a list of potential nuclear targets at the end of World War II, the proposed targets were considered in terms of tactical, strategic, and economic value; their proximity to other population centers; and their historical and cultural significance to the Japanese people. The ancient city of Kyoto, long a center of cultural and religious tradition, was removed from the list, as was Tokyo, with its enormous civilian population. U.S. sensitivity to the ramifications of an atomic strike balanced the necessity of ending the war quickly against the realization that Japan would one day rely upon her historic and cultural institutions as she once again took her place in the family of nations.

All Soldiers and members of our sister services need to understand that Americans — in or out of uniform, at home or abroad — are representatives of this great nation and her armed forces. At home, our citizens look to us to embody and exemplify those Army values that define our national character. Abroad, the citizens of other countries — friend and adversary alike — will behave according to how we conduct



Staff Sergeant James L. Harper, Jr.

*Specialist Ryan Crabtree with the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, creates rapport with local shop owners during a patrol in Mosul, Iraq.*

ourselves. Imagine, today we have U.S. men and women in uniform serving in more than 100 countries around the world, and the foreign nationals with whom they must come in contact and interact on a daily basis see the United States of America in their actions. If we show strength, resolution, respect for human dignity, and courage, these traits will reassure our allies and cause our enemies to think long and hard before taking rash action. If potential adversaries realize that we mean what we say and cannot be intimidated, we are dealing from a position of strength, and will have achieved what has been called the position of moral ascendancy over them. But how can we better prepare ourselves and our Soldiers for the challenge of serving on foreign soil?

Most Army posts and their education centers and Army Community Service offices offer area studies, brochures, and other information on wherever service personnel are likely to be stationed, and this is a good way to begin. Pre-deployment training for units and individual replacements includes cultural awareness in its curriculum. Such training must begin early, indeed much of it already exists in the curricula of our educational institutions, and it rests upon both hard knowledge and understanding. The Internet is another excellent source of information that offers virtually unlimited insights into

the culture, customs, people, and geography of any country in the world. However you seek knowledge, the key is to READ! Read voraciously. Newspapers, periodicals, newscasts, films, interviews, all offer insights to provide the broadest possible base of information you can find, both on your target country and the region surrounding it.

While textbooks and motivated teachers can impart geographical, cultural, and religious background information to prepare us for overseas assignments, it is the intangible element of understanding that will ultimately define or limit success. We must be able to both understand what drives the foreigner to act as he does, and to impart to him an understanding of what motivates us as Americans. He needs to see our point of view. This does not mean that we need to challenge his own beliefs and values to win him over, but we need not reject any tenets of our own beliefs either, because that would accomplish nothing except to cause him to lose respect for us. In short, you don't need to "go native" to get your job done; always remember this.

Learning a foreign language can be difficult, but it can pay dividends in your understanding of a nation and its people, and in communicating with them. Aside from the obvious cultural benefits, knowing the host country language can provide access

to intelligence information that would be otherwise beyond our grasp, and speaking the local language can prevent many of the misunderstandings that can damage U.S. relations with the locals and thus hamper mission accomplishment. But I must warn you that once local nationals learn that you can speak their language you will get more attention than you had counted on, and you cannot let this distract you from doing your job.

Another point: you must understand the U.S. position on issues that affect the locals, and support that position without getting drawn into lengthy debate or confrontation on U.S. foreign policy. Refer media questions to your unit public affairs officer, and focus on accomplishing the mission you were sent there to do. Remember that you are part of a team, and that the members of that team support one another. Host nation personnel should understand that as a professional Soldier you owe your allegiance — and time — to the United States of America, and that this is your top priority. If they cannot grasp that concept, or if they try to induce you to

change your priorities, ignore them and focus on the mission. The words duty, honor, and country well define the priorities of an ambassador in uniform, and they must be our touchstone as we go about our duties.

Another important quality to cultivate is self-discipline; as an American in uniform, you will be closely observed, both by those who hope to emulate you and by others with more sinister motives. Any moral or personal weakness will soon be revealed, and in the worst possible light; if such should happen you will lose the respect of those who support you and lend credence to the accusations of your enemies. But worst of all, you will have brought discredit upon the uniform and the nation it represents,



Specialist Jose Ferrufino

*Sergeant Garret Alvey of the 3rd Infantry Division talks with a local citizen during a mission in Adwar, Iraq, November 14, 2005.*

something that none of us must ever permit.

In closing, let me stress that the role of an ambassador in uniform is an informal one; it carries no credentials, it requires no accreditation by the Department of State, and Soldiers seldom take part in the pomp and ceremonies that are a part of state functions. Their role is a far different one than the often high visibility functions performed by our diplomats, but one that can nevertheless have far-reaching consequences because of its direct interaction with the citizens of another country. We must make sure that we are correctly perceived as honest, disciplined professionals who are proud to wear the uniform of the United States of America, and that those who come in contact with us know we are in their country to do a job that is in the best interests of both nations. To put it simply, when you are overseas carry yourself as you would in America and do your job to the best of your ability. In this way you will show them what it means to be an American. Now go out there and show the colors. God bless America!



Petty Officer Alan D. Monyelle, USN

*Soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, pass out candy to children in Tall Afar, Iraq, November 1, 2005.*

---

**Colonel Robert B. Nett, U.S. Army, Retired,** entered military service in 1940 as a private in the Connecticut National Guard and later served as a platoon sergeant in the Pacific war zone. He graduated from Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning in December 1942 and returned to the Pacific to participate in the liberation of the Philippine Islands. On December 14, 1944, he earned the Medal of Honor for his actions, including hand-to-hand combat, during an operation in which he was wounded three times. Colonel Nett went on to serve in two more wars, in Korea and Vietnam, before retiring in 1973.

---